

Central KY Farmer Gives New Life to Old Tobacco Barn



Susan Harkins explains plans of her new certified kitchen to women attending the 2003 Women in Agriculture Conference.

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*Betty Overly
UK Extension Agent for
Family and Consumer
Science in Bourbon Co.*

By Aimee D. Heald

LEXINGTON, Ky. (March 5, 2003) - When Susan Harkins purchased the family farm several years ago, she never imagined all the things she would do as a third-generation landowner.

First she delved into organic crop production before it was widely popular, and then made her way into the surprising arena of Kentucky shrimp production. Eventually Sue became known as Bubbasue. The name stuck and Harkins soon reveled in the success of Bubbasue and Company shrimp.

Before long, Harkins knew she needed a certified kitchen for many products she wanted to process and develop including lamb, honey and shrimp. Finding an appropriate site may have been a challenge for some, but for Harkins it was easy - convert the old tobacco barn.

"I was growing organic tobacco up until the time construction started for the kitchen," she said, "With the products I raise, I needed access to a certified kitchen. I've really been limited in my shrimp business and I've only been able to bring them out of the pond and sell them whole."

Harkins said selling shrimp any way other than whole placed her operation in the category of "food processor" and you have to have a certified kitchen to be a food processor. So the kitchen was necessary for her to prepare and freeze shrimp for her growing customer base.

Certified kitchens sound more complicated than they actually are according to Bourbon County Cooperative Extension Agent for Family and Consumer Sciences Betty Overly.

"The most basic certified kitchen needs a three-compartment sink with drain boards," Overly said.

"Beyond that you need a mop area, a separate hand-washing area and a bathroom."

Harkins has gone one step further with her kitchen by modeling an environmentally friendly waste system.

"I'm modeling a wetlands waste water treatment system," she said. "I went to the Division of Conservation and they even helped me out with some of the funding. With this system, we are geared up to process up to 20,000 pounds of shrimp each year. I didn't want to pollute my groundwater and this is just a much more efficient, attractive and environmentally friendly way to do it."

Recently, women at the 4th annual Women in Agriculture Conference held in Lexington were able to tour Harkins' new kitchen as one of several agricultural industry tours immediately following the conference. Pam Sigler, an Extension associate in family and consumer sciences and University of Kentucky conference planning committee member, said the tours were a new addition this year.

"I think the tours really help because we can see these operations and see what's being built and what's involved in the process," she said. "A lot of times when you can actually see the production you can begin to visualize ways to do it yourself and adapt or build on it."

A certified kitchen can be a boon for producers wanting to add value to their products. Many times a product cannot be sold unless it was produced and packaged in one of these kitchens.

Overly said many of her clients use food products to supplement family income, especially in economically challenging times.

"Not everyone can afford to have a certified kitchen in their home," she said. "So in Bourbon County we're working toward having a community certified kitchen so people will have a place to come and make their candies, cakes and cookies. If you're going to sell your product, you really need to produce it in a certified kitchen. The convenience is important, but the peace of mind about health safety issues is priceless."

Harkins is about to go full force into the restaurant business in downtown Lexington with a new venture

called Doodles in the area of Third Street and Limestone. She'll sell products from her farm, as well as from other Kentucky growers, and the barn kitchen will serve another purpose.

"The new kitchen can also serve as a commissary for the restaurant," she said. "We'll be able to do things here because of the space that we wouldn't be able to do at the restaurant alone."

Harkins said she's hoping other farmers in the area will be able to use her certified kitchen in the future, but she's still working out the details.

The health inspector in each county must inspect certified kitchens and the owner must receive a permit before they can begin using the kitchen for any processing or product development.

Sigler said the cost doesn't have to be outrageous.

"Many times you can convert space you already have," she said. "Also, never forget about used equipment. You can find really good items that someone else just doesn't need anymore."

For more information about certified kitchens, contact your county Extension office.

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